

Soldiers *Online*



SGT Natalie Geniuk, a soldier stationed in Baumholder, Germany, enjoys the homey atmosphere of the Fisher House's living room.

Fisher House Serves

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

SINCE June 1990 the families of service members, veterans, and Defense and State Department employees around the world have found refuge and comfort in a home away from home across the United States, during some of the most trying times of their lives.

It's all thanks to the unprecedented generosity of a couple named Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher.

In June 2001 that generosity opened doors to the first Fisher House outside the United States, at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Landstuhl, Germany.

"It's already proven a godsend to families whose loved ones have had to undergo lengthy hospital stays for serious illnesses or specialized care and procedures," said Ed Abraham, a retired Army warrant officer and Red Cross volunteer at the Landstuhl Fisher House. "Right after it opened on June 18, it filled up."

Since the draw down and consolidation of U.S. military facilities overseas, LRMC has assumed "tertiary care" responsibility for the European Theater, thereby treating an increased number of patients, said LRMC spokeswoman Marie Shaw.

LRMC treats patients from all U.S. military services, veterans, DOD and State Department civilians and their dependents who require specialized medical care not available at other hospitals.

Patients from the Air Force hospitals at Lackenheath, England, and Spangdahlen and Bitburg, Germany, as well as from the Navy hospitals in Rota, Spain, and Naples, Italy, are also referred to LRMC, Shaw said.

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Colorful, well-manicured gardens and an inviting entranceway welcome guests to the first Fisher House in Europe, in Landstuhl, Germany.

Europe

to be near hospitalized family members. Families that live more than 40 miles from the hospital can stay at the Fisher House for \$10 a day. They can cook their own meals in a fully equipped kitchen, with all the conveniences of home, and do the family laundry on-site as well.

The house in Landstuhl can accommodate seven families, Abraham said. It's fronted by beds of multicolored flowers, and above the entranceway hangs a plaque that reads: "Dedicated to our greatest national treasure — our military service men and women and their loved ones."



Dawn O'Connell is able to spend time with her daughter, Kaela, and her husband, as they wait for the couple's newborn son to be released from the hospital.

Upon entering, guests will find a large but cozy living room with comfortable couches, tall windows that let in the daylight, and a library filled with books. An inviting dining room offers a relaxing atmosphere for mealtime and the opportunity to mingle with and draw comfort from other guests experiencing difficult times.

Among the first guests here were parents of newborn infants who remained in LRMC's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

"My main thing is that I'm near my son," said SGT Natalie Geniuk of Headquarters and Hqs. Company, 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, in Baumholder, Germany. Her baby weighed only two pounds, eight ounces, when she delivered at 29 weeks. "Initially, I stayed at the hospital's postpartum ward to be near him, but I got a new roommate every night, and my husband couldn't stay over. The Fisher House is great, because I can cook



SGT Natalie Geniuk, posing in one of the Fisher House's bedrooms, was among the first guests to experience its hospitality and warmth.

instead of having to eat out every day.”

Additionally, computers allow guests to stay in touch with their workplaces, send e-mail messages to friends and relatives, and research information relevant to their own medical concerns.

“My baby was born by emergency C-section at 29 weeks,” said Navy wife Dawn O’Connell, who could not be released from the hospital in Rota until several days after the birth. An emergency medevac from Landstuhl had flown the baby to LPMC because the Navy hospital didn’t have the resources to care for a baby so premature.

“My son was born on June 17, and the Fisher House held its opening ceremony on June 18,” O’Connell said. “When I got there, my husband was already checked in with our 2-year-old daughter. We got one of the bigger rooms, a suite with a bathroom, living area with chairs and a sleeper sofa, bedrooms with twin beds in each, and a TV and VCR.

“Among the benefits to being here is that my husband and daughter are here,”

O’Connell said. “She’s very



Flowers and fruit baskets decorated the Landstuhl Fisher House's kitchen on opening day in June.

dependent on us, especially with our focus on the new baby. Because we can all be together, she has one of us with her at night and both of us when she wakes up in the morning.”

Families of soldiers who might be hurt or become ill in the Balkans and are evacuated to LPMC could also stay here, Abraham said.

A regulation covering administration of the Fisher Houses cites 30 days as the maximum length of stay, Abraham said, “but the check-out date is based on the duration of medical treatment and can be extended at a commander’s discretion.”

Fisher Houses are nonappropriated-fund facilities and are supported by donations, not taxpayer dollars.

The generosity of military and civic organizations, and individuals, helps maintain the Fisher Houses and provide guests with such things as meals, household supplies and rides to the commissary or post exchange. □

A Life of Giving

ZACHARY Fisher died June 4, 1999. He would have been 91 in September.

Fisher was one of New York City’s leading real-estate developers. Since a construction injury kept him from military service during World War II, the son of immigrant parents from Czarist Russia always felt he owed the armed forces.

“I’ll never be able to pay the debt I owe all the members of the armed forces who sacrifice daily to preserve America’s way of life,” Fisher often said. He said his donations — millions of dollars over some 60 years — “are my way of saying thank you for protecting America’s freedom and giving me the opportunity to succeed.”

In the mid-1940s he established a support program called the Veterans’ Bedside Network, for veterans returning from combat.

In the early 1980s, following the tragic deaths of marines in Beirut and sailors aboard the USS *Stark* in the Persian Gulf, he established the Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher Armed Services Foundation to provide financial aid to the widows and children of American service members.

Today, the foundation supports veterans’ programs, national museums and community-restoration projects.

In 1989 the Fishers sent \$25,000 checks to each of the 47 families of sailors killed in an explosion aboard the USS *Iowa*.

In 1990 the foundation provided scholarships to 75 college students who are in the armed forces, former military or their children.

“You don’t measure a man by the amount of money he has, but by how he spends it,” Zachary always said.

Since the first Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher House opened in Portsmouth, Va., in 1990, 26 others have been built in the United States. The latest, built in Landstuhl, Germany, brings the total to 28.

To date, the Fisher Houses have collectively housed more than 45,000 guests, according to Fisher House Foundation President Arnold Fisher. He estimated savings to families at about \$33 million. — Heike Hasenauer

To learn more about Fisher Houses visit the Army Fisher Houses website at www.armyfisherhouses.org.